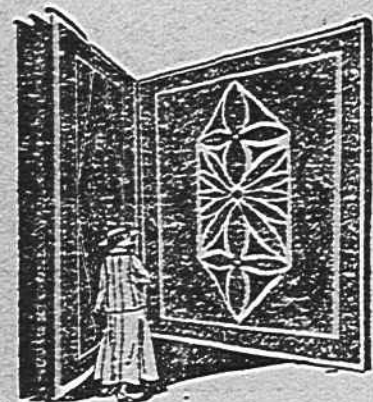


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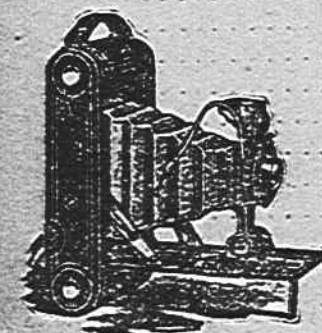
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## A FOSSIL BONONZA.

By Frederic J. Haskin.

A veritable glimpse into a prehistoric age when saber-toothed cats as big as cows preyed on giant ground sloths and elephants thirteen feet tall in these United States; when camels ranged the western plains in herds as great as those of the buffalo a hundred years ago; when man, if he existed at all, was a cowering, hiding, low-browed cave dweller, is afforded by the discovery of a remarkable deposit of bones in Los Angeles county, Calif. Under the auspices of the county museum, these relics of an age millions of years gone by are being carefully exhumed and preserved.

This prehistoric bonanza is a bed of asphalt on a tract of land known as the Rancho La Brea, located just outside the corporate limits of Los Angeles. The asphalt beds date from the Pleistocene era, which occurred only a few million years ago immediately ante-dating the modern period. At sometime during the Pleistocene, oil began seeping to the surface through a fault in some buried strata of rock. The more volatile portions of the oil quickly evaporated, leaving lakes and pools of tar which remain to this day much as they were during Pleistocene times. And just as the prehistoric animals were trapped millions of years ago, so jack rabbits and prairie dogs and birds are trapped by the asphalt today. So tenacious are these puddles of tar that if a skimming swallow dips his wing, he is more than apt to be held fast.

So through the ages creatures of all kinds have been caught in this natural trap. Their bones have sunk into the viscous mass which permeated and preserved them, while the softer portions remained on the surface and decayed. In this way whole skeletons of creatures that were dead a million years before man came to live upon the earth, have been preserved in their natural substance. These are not, strictly speaking, fossils; they are the actual bones preserved in asphalt, their color changed but their substance unaltered.

The tremendous significance of this find to science may be judged from the fact that most of our knowledge of prehistoric animals has been gleaned from scattered remnants of bone, mineralized by the slow action of water. When a creature dies in the ordinary way, his bones are quickly scattered; most of them are destroyed. Perhaps a single tooth, or the skeleton of a foot, is buried in the sand and turned to stone by the slow process of ages. Found by a scientist, this fossil will afford a valuable clue as to the kind of creature that lived in that remote age. But in the Rancho la Brea deposits complete skeletons of a great variety of creatures are preserved as perfectly as any collector could desire. From this rich mass of evidence the scientist can veritably reconstruct a scene.

One of the dominating types of the Pleistocene, of which numerous complete skeletons have been found, was the giant saber-toothed cat, a predatory beast larger than the largest African lion, and having its upper front teeth developed into a pair of tusks about a foot long. In build and general characteristics it resembled a modern tiger. A more formidable beast could scarcely be designed, and the saber-toothed cat was probably the most ferocious creature that ever lived upon the continent. In the La Brea deposits its skeleton is found in close proximity with those of the prehistoric bison, the giant ground sloth, larger than a horse and even the mastodon, the ancient form of the elephant. It is believed that the saber-toothed cat, with its unique and destructive dentition, successfully preyed upon all of these creatures.

Nothing surprises the average layman more than to learn that in the Pleistocene epoch great herds of camels ranged over the United States, and their skulls have been found in the La Brea tar pools. Although the camel is now wholly an Oriental animal and always thought of as such, it originated in America, crossed the land bridge into Asia and subsequently became extinct in this country, the llama of South America being the only survivor of the family in this hemisphere. The Pleistocene camel of America to judge by the skulls found at La Brea, was almost the size of the modern bactrian camel.

The story of the horse is much like that of the camel. There is no evidence that there were any horses alive in America when this continent was discovered by modern man. Yet in the La Brea deposits have been found a number of skulls and leg bones of a prehistoric type of horse. It was about the size of the modern horse, but it had a larger and coarser head and digested in other minor details of structure. This horse, like many of the other curious forms of the La Brea deposits, doubtless became extinct toward the end of the Pleistocene period when the modern types of animals had their origin.

The extinct Imperial elephant, which once roamed largely over North America, is represented in the La Brea deposits by remains which show that this animal stood thirteen and a half feet high at the shoulder, as compared with eleven and a half feet for the largest African elephants. The Imperial elephant had tusks fifteen feet long and eight inches in diameter. In a single tar pit the skeletons of seventeen Imperial elephants were found, so closely packed together that there was hardly enough of the asphalt to properly preserve them. Nevertheless, one complete skeleton of this giant mammal has been recovered

and will be set up in the museum. One of the most startling finds of the Rancho la Brea was that of a perfect human skull and fragmentary bones from other parts of the human body. Close study of this skull, however, has not brought scientists to any definite conclusions concerning it. They do not believe that it can be classed with the primitive Neanderthal man which existed in Europe in the Pleistocene. Yet its location in the deposit seems to indicate that it could hardly have been placed there during the historic period. The age of this skull, the scientists have concluded, most probably be measured in thousands of years, but not in tens of thousands.

Concerning the environment in which these strange animals lived, very little can be deduced. There is nothing to indicate positively that the climate of the country was very different from that of modern California, but the great size and numbers of the creatures that existed would indicate that the vegetation was much more abundant than that now existing in the same region. One nearly complete tree has been unearthed, and it has been identified as a species of spruce similar to one now existing in other parts of California. Skeletons of the saber-toothed cat, the giant wolf and the ground sloth, found immediately under the tree, would indicate that it formed a part of the prehistoric forest in which these animals lived. On the other hand, the presence of great herds of bison and camels would indicate that a considerable part of the land was open prairie.

A cave bear, much larger than the greatest modern grizzly; a giant wolf, much more stocky and powerful than the modern type and having immense jaws; a lion very similar to those now found in Africa; a giant ground sloth related to the modern anteaters and armadillos, but larger than a cow; a vulture with a wingspread of fourteen feet, are some of the other types and species which have been taken out of this remarkable deposit. Scientists in all parts of the world are watching the progress of the excavation with the utmost interest.

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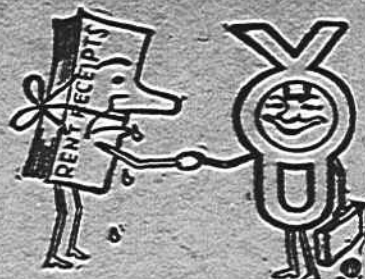
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